Essay-Review

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The "Sunbelt" South: A Brief Historiographic Assessment

The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrialization Development, 1936-1980, by James C. Cobb. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press. 1982. xiv, 298 pp.; *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1872-1984,* by James C. Cobb. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. 1984. xii, 186 pp. $19.00.; *Growth in the American South: Changing Regional Employment and Wage Patterns in the 1960s and 1970s,* by Robert J. Newman. New York and London: New York University Press. 1984. xviii, 230 pp. $30.00.

THE "SUNBELT" REVOLUTION HAS recently emerged as a distinct feature of Southern development. The region's recent upsurge in industrialization and urbanization, distinguishing features of this phenomenon, has tended to erode the apparent differences between the South and the rest of the nation. Southerners now boast of towering city skylines, high-tech industries, transportation facilities and even professional athletic teams and amusement centers the equal of any in the rest of the country. Henry Grady's New South has apparently come into its own. However, at the same time that it is bringing the South closer to the mainstream of American life than ever before, this development raises important questions about industrialization's impact on Southern institutions. Responsibility for setting the "Sunbelt" phenomenon in its proper perspective rests in large measure with the historian.

Prior to the 1960s there was a lack of the historical groundwork, the monographs, articles, and dissertations necessary to provide sound interpretations of industrialization's impact on the South during either the antebellum or the postbellum eras. Traditionally, this topic has not been a primary interest of historians of the South, as was acknowledged in 1950 by a group of historians commissioned by the Southern Historical Associa-

tion to assess the research needs of the South's past.[1] More than a decade later the history of industry in the South remained an underdeveloped topic. In 1966, Gerald D. Nash, attempting to encourage work in Southern economic history since Reconstruction, echoed the assessment of the Southern Historical Association's panel:

> The crucial nature of industrialism in affecting most phases of Southern life after 1880 makes it an especially important field of investigation for historians of the South. Paradoxically, however, this is still one of the least studied aspects of Southern history . . . .[2]

At almost the same time another historian, Paul M. Gaston, focused on the problem of sound interpretation created by the tendency of historians to ignore industrialization: "The whole field of southern economic growth badly needs attention, for many current generalizations rest on shaky foundations."[3]

Since Nash and Gaston penned their concerns, however, a significant body of work dealing with the history of industrialization in the South has appeared. It includes historical monographs concerned with a variety of topics related to industry both before and after the Civil War. Lumbering, petroleum, iron manufacture, textile production, and railroading are among the categories of industry which have received scholarly attention. Several works deal with individuals and their influence upon an industry. Notable among these are Charles B. Dew's *Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966) and John Hebron Moore's *Andrew Brown and Cypress Lumbering in the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967). Examples of industrial studies which have appeared during the last two decades are Arch Frederic Blakey's *Florida Phosphate Industry: A History of the Development and Use of a*

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[1] "Research Possibilities in Southern History," *The Journal of Southern History,* 16 (February 1950), 55.

[2] Gerald N. Nash, "Research Opportunities in the Economic History of the South after 1880," *The Journal of Southern History,* 32 (August 1966), 309.

[3] Paul M. Gaston, "The New South," in *Writing Southern History: Essays in Historiography in Honor of Fletcher M. Green,* ed. Arthur S. Link and Rembert W. Patrick. (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1965), p. 335.

Vital Mineral (Cambridge: Werthaim Committee, Harvard University, 1973) and Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr.'s *The Textile Industry in Antebellum South Carolina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969). Moreover, attention has also been given to Southern industrial workers. Works contributing to our understanding in this area include F. Ray Marshall's *Labor in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) and Robert S. Starobin's *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). And finally, a thorough analysis of the important New South ideology has been furnished by Paul M. Gaston in his *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

Added to the growing number of monographs concerned with Southern industrialization are three recent works which increase significantly our understanding of the recent "Sunbelt" phenomenon. Two of these are extensive exercises in historical analysis by James C. Cobb, the interpretive bases of which rest upon the expanding body of historical writing illustrated in the foregoing paragraph. The third, an econometric study by Robert J. Newman, owes its place in this discussion to its contribution to our historical understanding of the "Sunbelt" revolution through the empirical analysis of certain economic factors. These three studies, although products of differing approaches to the issue, historical and econometric, have succeeded to a significant degree in placing this most recent manifestation of Southern industrial development within its historical context as well as contributing further to the filling in of a critical gap in Southern historiography.

Cobb's *The Selling of the South* analyzes the post-Depression efforts of Southerners to attract industry into the region. A business progressivism which stressed government involvement in attracting industry, combined with the presence of a cheap and docile labor supply, provided Southern promoters with the means to accomplish industrial expansion. This pursuit of industry resulted, paradoxically, in the encouragement of both change and continuity in the life of the region. Though the advocates of industrialization did effect change by attracting a significant amount of new industry to the region, the industries

attracted were low-paying, labor-oriented establishments which, according to Cobb, did "little to impair the South's reputation as the nation's 'number one economic problem'" (p. 63).

Cobb focuses on government involvement in the process with a full discussion of Mississippi's Balance Agriculture with Industry plan. This scheme introduced into the South an era of state subsidies to new industry. Subsequently, promoters would utilize government on both state and local levels to extend services, maintain low tax rates, and ensure a sympathetic regulation of the region's resources. The vital supply of cheap labor was maintained by an anti-unionism which was exhibited not only by the region's leadership but also among Southern laborers as well.

Complicating the efforts to attract industry were the struggle for integration and the inadequacies of the region's communities and institutions. The civil rights movement brought forth pressure for moderation on the part of industrial promoters in some parts of the South. Cobb notes that "In the interest of continued growth, many of those responsible for recruiting new industry became reluctant advocates of a peaceful transition to token desegregation" (p. 122). In those parts of the South where the economic spokesmen did not speak up there were ugly outbreaks such as that which occurred at the University of Mississippi in 1962. Cobb's failure to provide a clear assessment of the impact of civil rights violence on the process of industrial attraction is one of the few disappointments in this book. The results of the efforts to increase the South's physical and institutional attractiveness are more clearly defined. Improved education, worker training programs, better community facilities, and research and development activities, while often limited in nature, "contributed to a significant improvement of the South's image in the eyes of potential investors and the nation at large" (p. 177).

According to Cobb, World War II was the "take-off" point in the economic growth which led to the "Sunbelt" revolution. External factors such as the nation's reaction to Vietnam and Watergate made the South more acceptable to the nation as a whole. Underlying the economic growth, however, was the continuing reliance upon attracting industry with state and local governments sympathetic to the needs of industry and with a

cheap and docile labor supply. This dependence created a dilemma for the "sellers of the South." Cobb argues that the reliance of the region's economic leadership upon subsidies, low taxation, and cheap labor as bait for industry at the same time obstructed chances for improving the quality of life for Southerners, white as well as black.

In *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984,* Professor Cobb goes beyond the "selling of the South" and places the "Sunbelt" revolution in the context of Southern industrialization, beginning with the antebellum period but with especial focus on the years since Reconstruction. Beginning his discussion with the antebellum era, Cobb surveys the restricted nature of the region's industrial development at that time. Among the major inhibiting factors was the tendency of the planter class to place its capital resources in the relatively secure investment of land and slaves rather than in riskier industrial investment. Moreover, while there was some industry present in the antebellum South which did exhibit a moderate amount of diversification, industrialization remained secondary to the region's agricultural economy and was certainly no competitive threat to that existing in the North.

The case for continuity which Cobb developed in *The Selling of the South* is made here as well. With industry emerging from the Reconstruction era unchanged from its antebellum condition, the New South crusade promoted by Henry Grady began. Cobb maintains that instead of representing "an ascendant middle class threatening to break the grip of wealthy landowners on the levers of economic and political influence in the region" the New South movement involved continued planter dominance in the economic development of the region (p. 14). New South industrialization continued the antebellum characteristics of being labor intensive and extractive. These characteristics contributed to the persistently colonial nature of postbellum Southern industry, the Alabama iron industry serving as an example.

The influences of business progressivism and World War II play an important role in this study just as they do in Cobb's earlier work. He repeats his argument that business progressivism had a significant impact on the New South promotion efforts.

He credits this influence with fusing "the reform impulse and the concept of expanded state responsibility with the campaign for industrial growth to spawn an era of state-sponsored recruitment of new industry" (p. 27). Though, with the passage of time these efforts to "sell the South" become better organized, Cobb contends that the New South pattern of reliance upon slow-growth, low-wage industries continued into the post-Depression decades. But with the coming of World War II forces were released which led to the "Sunbelt" revolution of the 1960s and the 1970s. These included a population increase as numbers of people moved to the region and an increase in non-extractive and service industries. Nevertheless, the New South pattern of dependence on the lures of low taxes, raw materials, and cheap labor still prevailed.

As in *The Selling of the South,* Cobb notes the widespread regional resistance to unionization and environmental protection. He points out as a justification for the anti-union position, however, the South's continued dependence upon low-wage industries which were attracted by the non-union labor supply of the region. In the area of utilization of natural resources, as in the matter of unionization, the South's choice was immediate economic gain. Although industrialization, and in particular the "Sunbelt" revolution, brought dramatic changes to the South, Cobb contends that the region's cultural distinctiveness remained, as did many problems of a traditionally underdeveloped economy. In both of his works Cobb presents a persuasive argument for the concurrent presence of both change and continuity in an industrializing South.

In *Growth in the American South,* Robert J. Newman furnishes an econometric study of industrial growth and wage-level increases in the South during the era of the "Sunbelt" revolution which bolsters the theme of "change and continuity." Maintaining that economic growth is seldom uniform across regions, Newman begins by identifying the South as an economically backward region in an otherwise prosperous nation. This pattern, however, was disrupted as a consequence of the economic growth which resulted in the "Sunbelt" phenomenon. Newman focuses on industrial immigration and

the increase in Southern wage levels. To determine the cause of the migration of industries into the South, he isolates three factors: state and local taxing policies, a business climate shaped by the existence of right-to-work laws and a low degree of unionization. Using an empirical method, Newman determines that these factors have indeed been major causes of the South's impressive industrial gains. He concludes also that there has been a notable lessening of wage differences between the South and the rest of the nation, a significant factor being increased industrialization. While this is not an easy work for a layman (or a historian) to read, because of its econometric orientation, it is still a useful addition to the understanding of the history of Southern industrialization in general and the "Sunbelt" South in particular.

While falling short of answering all of the questions raised by the "Sunbelt" phenomenon, both Cobb and Newman have, nevertheless, made significant contributions to the scholarly examination of Southern industrialization. Because of their work, as well as other scholarly efforts of the past two decades, historical interpretation of Southern economic growth rests on increasingly sturdy foundations.